

Report to the President

Visit to Vietnam and Cambodia

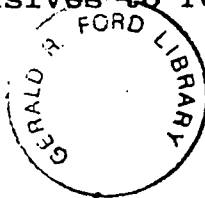
February, 1975

1. I visited South Vietnam from 9th to 21st February with two days in Phnom Penh on 15th and 16th. This was a very rushed trip, but I was able to visit all regions and to see the key commanders and officials, all of whom I have known well in the past and whose judgement and opinions I respect.

General Military Situation

2. In considering the military situation and the military assistance required by South Vietnam it is essential to appreciate that Hanoi and the NVA have the strategic initiative. This stems partly from the shape and geography of South Vietnam but mainly from the in-place locations of NVA forces after the Paris Agreement and Hanoi's violation (always intended) of Article 7 (one-for-one replacement within South Vietnam) and Article 20 (no foreign troops in Laos and Cambodia, i.e. down the Trail). This strategic initiative means that Hanoi has to devote few resources to defence and enables the NVA to conduct military offensives when and where it likes and to dictate the pace of the military campaign.

3. That campaign, in violation of the Agreement, is being conducted with increased intensity as shown by the number of GVN enclaves and other areas overrun, culminating in the recent conquest of the whole of Phuoc Long province. All of these areas were clearly in GVN hands in January, 1973. In response to this campaign the GVN has been unable to mount more than minor tactical counter-offensives to regain lost populated



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territory or spoiling operations to blunt local NVA offensives. Since its initial response to the NVA's land-grabbing offensive at the time of the ceasefire, the GVN has been quite unable to mount any substantial counter-offensive. ARVN has had neither the reserves nor the fire-power. Its air power has been neutralised by the great increase in the NVA's air defence units, and by lack of fuel and above all replacements. For two years it has had to adopt solely a defensive posture and to conduct holding operations.

4. It is interesting to note that there is at present little direct pressure in the area of the 1972 battlefields, in Quang Tri and north of Hue, and round Kontum and An Loc, all well-known names. Hanoi's objective has been partly to gain real estate, population and communication routes, but mainly to inflict damage materially and above all psychologically on ARVN and the GVN, thereby making United States aid the absolute life-line both physically and mentally. NVA activity, supported by Hanoi's diplomatic and propaganda campaigns, has been directly related to the flow of aid and Hanoi's assessment of American support for the GVN. Activity noticeably increased in 1973 after the bombing halt in Cambodia and again in the latter part of 1974 when military aid was cut. It has now decreased momentarily in the hope that Congress will not approve the proposed additional \$300 million for FY 1975. In higher strategic terms, therefore, Hanoi is concentrating its present effort on the critical and decisive factor of the life-line.

5. I attach as an Appendix a short summary of the situation in each of the four military regions.

Military Aid

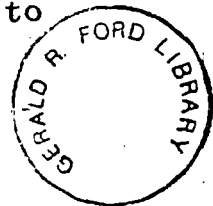
6. There are some points of a general nature about the GVN's military requirements. Because of the NVA's strategic



initiative, ARVN's consumer requirements, especially of ammunition and POL, must inevitably be relatively greater - in my view, at least one and a half times. With its improved road network and speed of supply and reinforcement (roughly three weeks instead of three months) the NVA is able to deploy a great superiority of force on any one of the fronts and to achieve a decisive military victory there. If the re-supply of both sides was only equal (say x tons a year) the NVA could commit, in consumption terms, more than half x on one front without running any risk at all on the other three, whereas ARVN has to stretch its resources more or less equally and cannot take a risk on any front without losing the war.

7. Another factor affecting consumption is that, because ARVN is having to defend fixed positions, towns and installations, NVA artillery can score a very high percentage of direct hits to which ARVN can only reply indirectly and almost blindly, and therefore more extravagantly. For example, even with rockets, the NVA cannot miss Tay Ninh, a sprawling city of 200,000 people, whereas ARVN in reply can fire a thousand rounds without being sure of hitting anything. Incidentally, when I visited this city I was very impressed by the calm manner in which the population, from the markets to the schools, continued to go about ordinary everyday business. Traffic to and from Saigon was running normally. Although some shops have closed there was no marked exodus and no panic.

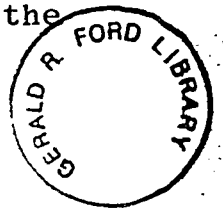
8. During the last two years the NVA has inserted more than a one-for-one replacement of basic equipment and weaponry, both in quality and quantity, whereas ARVN has never had a one-for-one replacement and on some items no replacement at all. There are even items of the infantry soldiers' equipment and basic weapons which, on \$700 million a year at 1975 prices, just cannot be replaced. This \$700 million is equivalent to



\$400 million in 1974, when GVN received \$1.4 billion so that, at 1974 prices, the reduction in military aid has been \$1 billion.

9. The most serious shortage of all is ammunition which is mainly reflected in fire support. I fully agree with the analysis that at the time of the ceasefire the North's stocks, stretched over a line of supply from Haiphong to the fronts, was comparatively much higher than those of ARVN which could rely on a rapid supply through its ports and could therefore hold in-country requirements for a comparatively short period of intensive combat activity. It is, of course, impossible to compute this difference in terms of exact tonnage although it is estimated that the NVA now has 20 months supply at 1972 expenditure rates. The stark statistic is that ARVN's in-country stocks have been run down from 178,000 tons to 120,000, a reduction of one third. This greatly reduces flexibility through the inability to switch between fronts. It is worth bearing in mind that, in the summer of 1972 during the ARVN counter-offensive in MR I, an average of 20,000 artillery rounds were fired a day north of the Hai Van pass and, in the counter-attack on Quang Tri itself, the Marines alone fired that amount. This is quite apart from the average of 15 to 20 three plane B 52 strikes, 150 U.S. tactical air strikes and 3,000 rounds of naval gunfire a day. At the present scale of activity for modern war this is the cheapest war that has ever been fought. ARVN is expending, excluding air, little more than was used by one U.S. division. Israel in 1973 would have collapsed in twenty-four hours!

10. One result of this is that ARVN is taking a higher ratio of casualties than in the past. For example, in regaining the hills dominating Route I south of Hue, ARVN I Division lost (killed in action) one for two. This is reflected in the

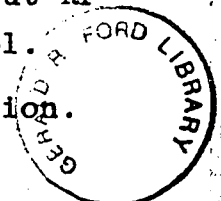


overall casualty estimates for 1974 of about 60,000 NVA KIA and about 30,000 ARVN, whereas in earlier campaigns the ratio was sometimes as high as one for six with a minimum of one for three. It astonishes me that in spite of all this the ARVN soldier is superior to, and is still fighting better than, his enemy. The NVA is of course suffering from the loss of leadership in previous campaigns and the extreme youth of present replacements, whereas ARVN is better served in this respect and is now facing the stark reality of survival.

Nature of the War

11. The nature of the war has also changed. Pacification was originally designed to regain control over developed and populated areas of the countryside and to break the VC structure and control. In this it was very largely successful between 1968 and 1971. In this field the GVN's problem now, apart from economic and agricultural development, is to prevent the re-creation of the VC structure. It has become necessary for the NVA forces to regain populated territory in which the VC structure can then be re-created. This is the purpose behind the NVA's restructuring of some former VC battalions (between 60-80% composed of NVA fillers) and independent NVA regiments into local divisions which can be combined with regular divisions in corps commands for each locality. Going higher, Hanoi has now established regional commands running from MR 1 in northern North Vietnam right down to MR 9 in the southern tip of South Vietnam (trans-Bassac). It is this restructuring that largely accounts for the regression in the Delta. Regrouped NVA forces at divisional and not less than regimental strength are being directed into the soft under-belly where, with their superior strength and fire-power, they can wipe out RF and PF units and outposts and destroy Government control.

12. There are two interesting features in this situation.



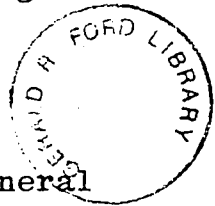
The population is not now deserting its land and becoming refugees, though young men who might be conscripted by the NVA have cleared out because there is little evidence of successful VC recruiting as yet. Because of a shortage of VC cadres VC control is not yet being re-established. These areas therefore belong to whichever side can maintain dominant military forces in them and are still contested.

13. One further cause of the regression in MR IV has been neglect. This has recently been rectified by the appointment of MG Nam to MR IV and some new Province Chiefs.

14. The changed nature of the war, however, does raise two problems. The first is a need for the slight restructuring of ARVN to meet the large unit threat. Gone are the days when good RF battalions or groups of them, with unlimited artillery and air support, could defeat marauding NVA regiments or battalions as occurred in the Delta in 1972. It may be necessary for the GVN to restructure its RF battalions so that they can be combined with regular divisions in rather the same way that the NVA has done. This is being studied. Secondly, ARVN overall manpower has been allowed to run down more than was intended by demobilization. I suspect that the overall figure is well below the nominal ceiling of about 970,000. In view of the likely continuing scale of activity it is essential that ARVN should have trained replacements available. An intensive recruiting campaign and round-up of draft dodgers is now taking place for this purpose.

NVA intentions

15. If all four regions are considered there is a general move southward of NVA forces as a whole and in each region. There are now fifteen NVA infantry divisions in-country which, because of the restructuring, does not represent a very great increase in the number of units (other than anti-aircraft) but

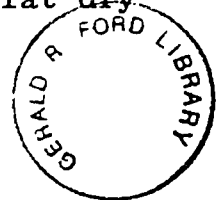


does represent a very considerable increase in manpower. The number of replacements expected to arrive in 1975 is about 100,000 which is reminiscent of 1968 and 1972.

16. Moreover, in North Vietnam there are now seven divisions in strategic reserve, some of which are new or training divisions, but at least three are divisions which fought in MR I in 1972 and they could be committed very rapidly in ten or fourteen days with little prior warning. If that occurred, MR I would fall, ARVN would lose at least the Airborne, Marine, 1 and 3 Divisions and would collapse. The war would be over. That is the NVA's present capability but it is not yet necessarily their intention. The whole issue hinges on the restraints and sanctions still operating on Hanoi. Its intention can still best be summed up as a preference for the collapse of South Vietnam not its conquest.

17. Here I must admit that I am making a judgement without concrete evidence - that there will be no major offensive on the 1972 scale during 1975. I do, however, expect Hanoi to spend 60,000 + men KIA during the remainder of this year.

18. In addition to the lesser objectives of gaining territory and population, cutting communications, inflicting casualties and material damage on ARVN, and generally exerting pressure on all fronts, I think that Hanoi has two major objectives in 1975. First, the NVA may well try to take Tay Ninh. This would further increase the scale of activity and the decision may depend on the additional \$300 million not being made available to the GVN. Tay Ninh is an attractive and easily isolated target with 200,000 people in the city alone and some agricultural wealth. This would make it a viable PRG capital and would inflict a very serious psychological blow on South Vietnam. The second objective might be the improvement of access to the direct route to Saigon, which is the flat dry



spur between the Saigon and Song Be rivers, running down to Bien Hoa and Saigon. This intention has already been indicated by the capture of Phuoc Long and a further indicator would be attempts to take Quang Duc, as a means of improving supply routes, and also the district of Phu Giao to provide better access across the Song Be. This is an alternative option for the deployment of the strategic reserve if a straight military decision is sought.

The GVN concept

19. I found President Thieu had a very clear concept of the way ahead. He recognised that 1975 and 1976 would be very critical years but that all South Vietnam had to do was to survive. It did not have to win anything but it must not be defeated. He also recognised the changed nature of the war and the problem of manpower and restructuring. He thought that the NVA could now be regarded as an expeditionary force and that, like the French and American expeditionary forces before it, the NVA would be defeated through its rear base, where the split between those who wished to continue the war at all costs and those who wished to restore the economy would intensify. The continued determination of the United States is in this respect the most influential factor. Thieu also appreciated that he would probably not get the \$300 million and that this was not win or lose - at least in material terms. It would be a psychological blow to South Vietnam and might encourage the North to higher activity. He agreed that a package deal over three years was much more important and the only realistic course of action, with which I am in full agreement.

Thieu's political position

20. On the political front there is no alternative to Thieu and no sign that his political position is crumbling.

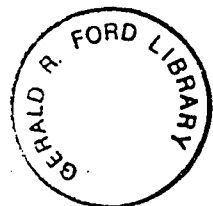


times are hard and the future is uncertain there is always some surface froth (which at least says something for the openness of South Vietnamese society) but no substance or cohesion in the opposition. There is still the point that no opposition leader wishes to stand against Thieu and get less than 20% of the votes. There is no such thing as a third force but anyone who knows South Vietnam could nominate twenty men and call them that. In my view there is only one man who could take over from Thieu, and that is General Truong in MR I. But he would have to be drafted and would only do it in a constitutional manner if Thieu stood down. It was interesting that two GVN ministers, Dr. Dan and M. Hao, both of whom are serious and frank, and no sycophants, went out of their way to stress Thieu's qualities and their support for him.

Economy

21. If anyone, even three years ago, had forecast the present economic situation they would have predicted a total collapse. A year ago I too had thought that, with the high unemployment and under-employment in the cities, disturbances might occur which could bring down the Government. No other country has proved itself so resilient. As it is the economy is on the bottom but somehow still afloat. It is amazing that in 1974, thanks to a strict monetary policy, inflation was held to 40% and foreign exchange reserves actually increased by \$37 million. One encouraging feature was additional foreign aid other than American, with an increase to \$120 million a year and a further commitment of \$60 million which the country could not immediately absorb.

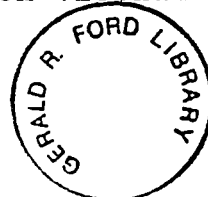
22. The most encouraging aspect has been that, in spite of the fuel crisis and the high price of fertiliser, agricultural production has again increased. Travelling round the country I never fail to be impressed by the intensity of the cultivation.



Naturally the more stable the area, the better it is. On one point, which last year was controversial, I am now convinced. South Vietnam must now export rice as soon as the current PL 480 programme is concluded. The announcement needs to be made in the near future as an incentive both to further deliveries from the Delta into Saigon and to the coming year's production. This presents some problems with regard to the local supply and price of rice, but these can be solved. At least the economic situation compares very favourably with the North where conditions are much worse and a million tons of grain has to be imported annually. Some of this is required to support NVA divisions in MR I and II. Within three years, given no worse a military situation, the South's export of rice might approach one million tons. This, coupled with the oil prospects by then hopefully proved, could make South Vietnam entirely self-supporting and an attractive proposition both for institutional investment and risk capital.

Cambodia

23. While, therefore, there are still good prospects of saving South Vietnam, I regret that I cannot say the same about Cambodia, as my signal of 17 February makes clear. The massive airlift now planned will gain a little more time but contains its own risks. I do not think FANK has the reserves left to re-open the Mekong and to keep it open. Even if that was possible there is certainly not the strength or will left in the GKR to push the KC forces back from the capital, to re-open Routes 4 and 5 and to link up with the more heavily populated enclaves. We have to be prepared for a total collapse which cannot fail to have a dangerous psychological effect on South Vietnam, particularly Saigon. Materially it may not make much difference to the South over the next year or two because the NVA already has all the access it requires to South Vietnam along the Cambodian border.

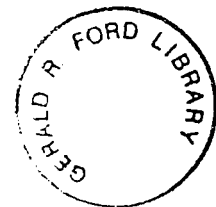


Conclusion

24. The higher rate of NVA activity in December and January and the loss of Phuoc Long are not the beginning of the end, as some predict, unless Congress so decides. The North, as I forecast early in 1973, has taken two years to restore its military capability but that does not mean that it is going to use it. Yet again the decision rests in part with Congress and the American people. South Vietnam has played its part in a manner unsurpassed in history which no one would have deemed possible. It is ready to continue fighting and, given the minimum of support sufficient to encourage its people and to deter Hanoi, to hold out successfully so that the long American involvement can be ended. But, if the support is not forthcoming, South Vietnam will go down fighting to the eternal disgrace of the United States. That is the choice. It is not only the future of South Vietnam which is at stake.

Robert Thompson

23 February, 1975.



APPENDIX

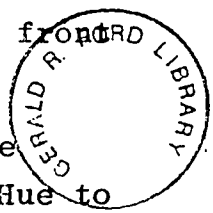
Situation in the Military Regions

MR I

1. It has been quiet north of Hue and GVN positions are held by Regional Forces and Marines only. The area west of Hue round Bastogne has also been comparatively quiet. There has however been a strong offensive south of Hue between Phu Bai airfield and Phu Loc from the area north of Nam Dong against ARVN 1 Division. Route 1 was cut and the high ground overlooking it taken but in a major action 1 Division regained all positions. This pressure could be repeated at any time as the NVA has a good dry weather road to Nam Dong which can be further extended southwards towards Danang. An attack north of the Hai Vang pass could cut off Hue, which is a more likely NVA intention than a direct attack on the city. If it should fall, the NVA would gain the whole population of the northern two provinces instead of driving it south as refugees. It is very important that the sea supply access route from the coast east of Hue should be restored and maintained.

2. In order to keep ARVN positions in MR I inflexible, the NVA must also keep up its pressure in the area of Duc Duc and Que Son in Quang Nam province where its two former 711 and 2 Divisions have been combined. It is also likely that the NVA will retain 57 Regiment in Quang Ngai to hold ARVN 2 Division in that area and to keep it stretched over a very long front in the southern two provinces.

3. The major changes since my last visit are that the Airborne Division has been brought back from north of Hue to defend the southern approaches to Danang and that both Marines



and Airborne have been milked to provide a two brigade reserve for Saigon. The NVA has also greatly improved its mountain road communications from Laos and increased its firepower. There is now no interdiction of forward NVA convoy movements because of both heavy AA defence and no prospect of lost aircraft being replaced.

4. There is no indication of political or economic difficulties in Danang or Hue. General Truong is highly respected and maintains good discipline.

5. I met all commanding generals except of the Marines and got the definite impression that, given the ammunition, they could hold present positions unless Hanoi commits further divisions from its strategic reserve.

MR II

6. With 22 Division back in Binh Dinh, this large and heavily populated province is in fairly good shape. The division moved from Kontum and was in action near Bong Son within twenty-four hours having covered a distance of about 150 miles. The old NVA 3 Division, which has been in the three northern districts for several years, has been pushed back from Route 1 and the action was continued into the base of the An Lao valley. NVA 3 Division, however, remains in a position in the hills where it can threaten either Route 19 near An Khe or Route 1 south of Bong Son. If it is not reinforced I am quite confident that 22 Division under BG Niem can cope with this.

7. There are now three NVA divisions in the highlands on the border with Laos and Cambodia. NVA 320 Division has been moved south towards Ban Me Thuot and NVA 968 Division has been inserted from Laos in the Duc Co area south and west of Pleiku. NVA F10 Division, which was north of Kontum, also seems to be drifting south. Kontum is well held by four ranger groups



(twelve battalions) but, as always, is vulnerable to being cut off. Ninety days' food supply is held for both military and population. 23 Division is defending the area west of Pleiku southwards and is a bit stretched.

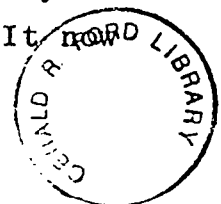
8. From the general southward move of major NVA formations it seems likely that Quang Duc province is the objective with Routes 14, 19 and 21 possibly being cut. Such an offensive would cause great difficulty without being too flagrant an attack. However, MR II under MG Phu, a renowned fighting general and former commander of 1 Division, should be able to hold any such offensive unless additional forces are committed by the NVA.

9. The other provinces on the coast and in the south eastern portion of this large military region have been quiet and seem likely to remain so.

MR III

10. The old 7th and 9th are the two NVA regular divisions in this region. There is a possibility that former NVA independent regiments have been grouped into a new local 3 Division (I cannot understand this designation as it conflicts with the old 3 Division in Binh Dinh). The two old 274 and 33 Regiments have also been combined in the eastern provinces into a local 6 Division. The more significant new development is that all these forces are now controlled by 301 Corps which comes under COSVN located in northern Tay Ninh.

11. Since the capture of Phuoc Long NVA forces seem to have been shifted south and west with the newly inserted 271 Regiment immediately north of Tay Ninh, with 9 Division on the Saigon river and 7 Division on the Song Be. The main target, already attacked twice since the ceasefire, could be Tay Ninh city with local forces cutting the road south of it to Saigon. It now



has a population of 200,000 and is partly overlooked by Black Virgin mountain, captured by the NVA in the last attack. The city has been spasmodically shelled and some shops have closed but the population seems calm. There is still normal two-way traffic to Saigon and three months' rice supplies are being built up. I visited the city with BG Ba (who held Kontum in 1972). He now commands 25 Division and is all ready for an attack with his main forces in mobile positions.

12. The other likely target is Phu Giao district which would open Route 1A and Route 13 to NVA 7 Division. BG Vy of ARVN 5 Division is ready to meet this but his forces are in a less flexible position with more or less a fixed front running from the Saigon river to the Song Be through Ben Cat.

13. In the eastern area I think the NVA will continue to threaten Route 1 and Route 20 to Dalat, thereby keeping 18 Division fully occupied. It is most unlikely that ARVN can recapture Than Linh district where the main enemy target was the ricefields in this secluded valley. I doubt if any further major attacks will develop in this area except on communications.

14. It is a great relief that LG Toan is now commanding MR III. Whatever his reputation, he is a tough, fighting general even if he earns more than his pay. He is immediately taking steps to build up a mobile reserve and to make sure that trained recruits are available as replacements. He appreciates that the NVA still holds the initiative but he hopes that in an engagement with a major unit he can then inflict heavy casualties and regain at least the tactical initiative. Otherwise he expects to hold the populated areas which are now well cultivated and look very prosperous. The GVN is reaping the reward of rural stability resulting from the pacification programme.

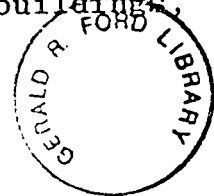


15. In this MR, however, Saigon is always the target both militarily and psychologically. Although it is my impression that the NVA would like to grab Tay Ninh this year they will also prepare the ground for a possible major offensive directed at the capital later. Meanwhile sapper penetrations of Saigon and Gia Dinh will continue along the familiar infiltration routes of the "Pineapple" and the Saigon river to cause minor disruptions of the economy and despondency.

MR IV

16. GVN MR IV has now become NVA's MR 8 in the northern Delta and MR 9 in the south (trans-Bassac). NVA 5 Division has been moved from MR III into the Parrot's Beak with Kien Tuong province as its operating area and Moc Hoa as its possible objective. It is being held there by ARVN 9 Division and is constantly retiring into Cambodia to recoup. The local NVA F8 Division continues to threaten Dinh Tuong province but is held by two regiments of 7 Division. In the southern part of the Delta NVA forces in Chuong Thien province, including 95A Regiment (the first North Vietnamese unit to enter South Vietnam in 1964), have been regrouped into a local F4 Division while 101 Regiment from the original, but now apparently defunct, NVA 1 Division operates in Kien Giang province to protect the infiltration route from Cambodia. The total NVA armed strength in the whole Delta is now estimated at about 60,000 with an infiltration rate in 1974 of 11,000 plus 5 Division.

17. The NVA is therefore now organised and equipped for a main force type of war rather than VC guerrilla action. This reinforces President Thieu's view that ARVN's military structure must be adapted to meet it. The NVA target is pacification and government control in the rural areas including the destruction of small RF and PF units. The VC are not occupying villages overrun. They burn government buildings.



clinics and schools, and then leave. The population is not fleeing as before but families remain on their cultivated land. Owing to the exodus of youth, VC have been using 13-14 year olds for minor assassination and sabotage tasks.

18. Pacification has suffered from neglect and the situation in Vinh Long and Vinh Binh provinces in the centre of the Delta is serious. Both Province Chiefs have sensible plans for restoring stability and these are being co-ordinated by a special command to which two 7 Division battalions have been allocated.

19. Shortages have also contributed to the regression. For example, helicopter hours are now one fifth of 1972 against equivalent activity. This is a major reason for loss of contact with outposts. There is also a shortage of pontoons, a vital requirement, to maintain road access. Radio sets are in short supply and POL and ammo are down by 25-30%. This means that outposts cannot always be contacted or obtain fire support against NVA units with greatly superior weapons.

20. The major GVN problem in this MR is manpower. Regular battalions are down to under 300 in some cases and RF and PF are also very weak. A major round-up is being conducted and has been collecting more than 1,000 a day. The GVN is even prepared to go into the Khmer pagodas where many draft dodgers seek sanctuary. But the Vietcong are not recruiting either, and NVA/VC strengths, even in provinces like Vinh Binh, are about half what they were in 1964.

21. Now that MG Nam, formerly of 7 Division, has taken over the region and some province chiefs have been changed, there is every chance that this regression can be stopped, particularly as the whole Delta is now well cultivated and prosperous.

